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U.S. took three months to identify officer who visited Soviet Embassy

Washington (AP)—U.S. officials monitored telephone calls by an Air Force missile crewman to the Soviet Embassy in Washington in December before he visited the Russians, but were unsure of the man's identity or job for three months, Justice Department sources said yesterday.

It was not until sometime after early March that the Air Force's Office of Special Investigations was able to identify the man who had called and visited the embassy as Air Force 2d Lt. Christopher M. Cooke, the sources said.

Lieutenant Cooke, 25, was second in command of a four-person Titan II intercontinental ballistic missile crew at McConnell Air Force Base near Wichita, Kan.

He has been in pre-trial confinement at the base since being charged last Friday under military law with three counts of violating Air Force rules against unauthorized contact with representatives of a Communist country. Specifically, he is charged with three visits to the Soviet Embassy in Washington between December, 1980, and May, 1981.

The Justice Department sources who discussed the case on the condition they not be identified said that in the December telephone calls "there was reference to military matters" which required that the calls be looked into further. The sources said that the man who called used a phony name and did not give any indication whether he was a civilian or a soldier.

Asked how the government learned of the calls, one source said only that "the coverage was extensive in a case like this." It has been known for some time, however, that the FBI maintains photographic surveillance of the Soviet Embassy and electronic surveillance of the telephones of various foreign embassies in Washington.

The sources said that by March the FBI had determined that the man telephoning and visiting the embassy was either Christopher Cooke or his brother, Richard Cooke, Jr., both of whom are in the Air Force.

In a telephone interview yesterday, Richard Cooke, Sr., said that both his sons are assigned to McConnell Air Force Base, where Richard is an airman first class assigned to the base's special police.

The Justice Department sources said that as soon as the FBI determined in early March that the man was in the Air Force and either Richard or Christopher Cooke, it turned the case over to the Air Force's Office of Special Investigations, which subsequently determined the man was Christopher Cooke.

The Justice Department sources also disclosed that Christopher Cooke had received from the Soviets "a small payment in the range of \$50." The sources said that the government has not been able to unravel Lieutenant Cooke's motivation in the alleged contacts.

The Justice Department is investigating whether federal criminal charges, including espionage, should be brought against him.